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Two Newest Scoop Artists Enjoy Daily Double of U.S. Journalism

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Their heads have stopped spinning and their telephones are no longer jangling off the hook. But for Washington's two newest scoop artists, Ken Wollack and Richard Straus, the afterglow of last week's news will be a long time dimming.

"It'll be a while," Straus said in an interview in a spartan office at 20th and I Streets, "before we have another one like that."

The pair are co-editors of the Middle East Policy Survey, a tiny (circulation 500) twice-monthly tip sheet which, on Feb. 26, pulled off what amounts to the Daily Double of U.S. journalism.

The lead story on page one of The New York Times that day was a report that Secretary of State Caspar W. Weinberger had won written assurances from the Saudis to share all intelligence gathered from Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) planes.

The lead story on page one of The Washington Post that day was a report that the National Security Council had just decided to cut off all oil imports from Libya.

The two articles were joined by one thread: both were based on, and so credited, reportage in the Middle East Policy Survey.

Washington is not just the nation's but surely the world's capital for newsletters, trade journals, poop sheets and the like. The information they purvey is aimed at a specialized readership. Rarely does it filter out into the general press. More rarely does it make a splashy landing on page one.

But in the two years since these two former lobbyists for the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) founded the Survey, they have been beating the general-interest press at its own game with some regularity.

The television networks, the wire services and The Christian Science Monitor have cited the Survey's reporting in recent months. In January a story broken by the Survey was the main article in The Jerusalem Post.

Who are these guys and where do they get their information?

Wollack, 33, full-faced and bearded, is a Quaker-educated Chicago native who spent eight years working Capitol Hill for AIPAC before deciding to strike out on his own. Straus, 34, a slight and angular Philadelphian, worked for AIPAC for two years and was a press aide on the Hill before that.

The two insist that they have no deep-throated mole who leaks them top secret information. Rather, they say, they have "lots and lots of sources, and they mine them continually."

The article that led The Jerusalem Post, for example, was the revelation of a cable from American Ambassador Samuel Lewis, speculating on possible Israeli moves before its withdrawal from the Sinai. "We never actually saw the cable," said Wollack. "We got wind of it, then we talked to about 10 different people who knew something about it, and we pieced it together."

Old-fashioned gumshoeing is step one in the making of a scoop. Step two for a publication like the Survey involves getting the ear of the general press, and here, too, Straus and Wollack know how to work the turf.

In each of their page one coups the pair fed their information to a single reporter the day before the Survey was published. That guaranteed that the favored reporter would have an exclusive and, so the theory goes, boosted the chances for good play.

The pre-release leak is a familiar strategy of the media-wise, but it can lead to moments of no small "existential" drama, as Straus discovered a week ago.

He awoke that that morning to see The Times and The Post citing stories in that day's issue of the Survey. As he read the two papers, that day's issue of the Survey was still in the typewriter of research assistant Susan Friedman, awaiting finishing touches and final editing. It doesn't go to the printers until noon every other Friday, and comes back two hours later.

"We got some calls from other papers Friday morning asking us to read passages from our articles," said Straus. "We told them we would rather paraphrase."

Wollack and Straus, who conduct an interview as if it were a two-throated monologue, each constantly interrupting the other but never breaking the train of thought, said they started the four-page newsletter because they "saw this vacuum on Middle East reporting in between the general circulation papers and the propaganda sheets."

They knew their AIPAC years would make their bona fides as impartial observers of the Middle East suspect. "We've really gone out of our way to establish our credibility, to play things down the middle, and not to editorialize," said Wollack.

The Survey generally gets high marks from Middle East watchers for impartiality, but it doesn't pass everyone's muster.

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